[Adam Laboda--Polish Textile Worker #2]

ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (Check one)

PUB. Living Lore in New England

(Massachusetts)

TITLE Adam Laboda, Polish Textile Worker #2

WRITER Clair W. Perry

DATE WDS. PP. 12

CHECKER DATE

SOURCE GIVEN (?) Interview

COMMENTS

Name Clair W. Perry

Title Living Lore

Assignment Berkshire

Topic Adam Laboda, Polish Textile Worker Paper Two Mass. 1938-9

Our second visit to Adam Laboda, began at the office of the Berkshire Woolen Company in Pittsfield, where he works as an expert spinner.

[We?] invited him to ride with us to his home in a four-tenement block on [Onota?] Street.

“Oh, I have my own car. You follow along and I'll be there,” he said with a grin.

He wore rough working clothes, a fur-lined overcoat over them, his neck was grimed and plastered with black dust from the material which

he had been handling. With his son, who is also employed at the mill, he got into a modern sedan parked in the mill-yard and drove rapidly home

— a distance of less than a half mile.

He met me at the back door of the tenement which he occupies, as the front doors have tight storm-doors over them and are seldom opened

in winter. Removing overshoes he invited me in, through the kitchen, where his wife was serving a meal to members of the family. Four of their

five children are working, the youngest, a girl of 13, attends the nearby grammar school. Two older daughters are employed as textile workers,

also and another son works on the second shift of the same mill where his father is employed.

Escorted into the front room, the radio was turned on by the older son to entertain me while his father washed up. On a stand was a Polish

paper, [Nova Anglica?] published in [Chicopee?], and on the 2 front page large pictures of Thaddeus Kosciusko and Abraham Lincoln, side by side. Over a small desk against the wall hung a rich [tapestry?] in soft browns and black, a woodland scene, with deer drinking at a pool, out over one corner of it hung a gaudy calendar advertising a Polish market. A Springfield Sunday paper lay on a stool, a phone on another and a thermostat near the kitchen door testified to modern heating apparatus.

Mr. Laboda appeared, still in working clothes but with his curly hair newly combed and face beaming. He lighted a cigarette in a holder and sat near the front window in his favorite rocking chair. In the kitchen voices could be heard, speaking Polish; the dark, good-looking wife and mother and an elderly Polish woman visitor with a kerchief over her head. The stairs to the second floor lead off the front room, for the tiny front hall is used as a coat closet. The two older daughters, home from work, soon came in to hang up their wraps. They are sturdy, buxom girls in their late 'teens or early twenties. Now and then the older son, who had visited Poland with his father, came to listen to his father's descriptions of the visit and reminded him of incidents.

“What we do for amusement when I am a boy in Poland? We played only about the yard or the barn, for we work very hard and long hours on the farm, all of us. There are so many in the family, eleven of 3 us, and the farm is about 25 acres, your size (American). When we play it is mostly to play soldiers; all the boys and girls play soldiers, always, then and talk a great deal about war and battles, [for?] then at that time where I live we are under Austrian rule, for Poland was partitioned to Austria, Russia and Germany. It was partitioned three times, in 1772, in 1777 and in 1779 and did not be free until 1918. We are taught much of the history of Poland, of its wars and its fighters and of the peasant revolts, which my father told of when the peasants armed themselves with — what you call, sy'es (scythes) on long handles and go to fight the high ups. That is all the weapons they have and they are beaten.

“That picture of Kosciusko is with Lincoln's because their birthday is the same day, yesterday (Feb. 12) and they are both patriots much admired by Polacks. Kosciusko came to fight for America you know and when he went home he led a peasant's revolt but was beaten. There was another one in 1846 when the peasants killed about 2000 of the nobility and won the fight but it did not do so much good. [We?] do not care much about our government because it is Austrian, that is really German , when I am a boy and although the men vote they do not think it means much to them and they just vote because it is a

custom. Yes, we are very proud of our country's history and we are taught it in school. You see, besides going to the grammar school 4 I also took special work three days a week and learned German. I prepare for high school like your junior high school here and when I am twelve I go to Germany. “No, we do not have much time to play, because of school and work. We get up at 5 o'clock in morning and work 'til dark. We have only kerosene lamps, then and we work hard in daylight, all the time. In winter we children must thresh out the wheat and rye and corn in the barn.

We use a long stick with a short one tied to it with leather string; what you call it? Flail. Yes, that is it, and we hit the wheat and rye and corn on the barn floor with it and thresh it out, beginning in winter and all through it. We are not too poor but we have so big a family that we have to work hard for we raise all that we eat on the farm. Oh, we have plenty to eat of everything, of cabbage, garlic, beets, turnips, potatoes, everything, and every winter just before Christmas we kill a big hog and have meat for the rest of the winter.

“But when I am twelve my father say to me, ‘Adam, you must find a job, because we are so many.’ It is the custom when a Polack boy is to be married that the father gives him a share of the farm, maybe two or three acres, you see. But if he gave it to all of us he would have nothing and no one would have enough land, although it is rich land and some families live on only 5 two or three of four acres there. Lots of poor people, oh, yes, many very poor people in Poland.

“We have many, many Jews in Poland. They do not work on the farm but they must always be selling things. They will get a big basket and buy a chicken, a duck, some corn and bread and go around from one house to another and sell it to be eaten. It is cooked already to eat and they sell it in small pieces to people. Then they go on to be merchants, always to sell and buy and sell. They do not work much and we do not care much for them but we are friendly. Never will they touch a pig, only other meat and they must be killed by a kosher butcher, too.

“[Them?] Germans are many, too and we are friendly with them. The poor people are very nice, the Germans, and so I found them in Germany, where I went. Yes, I went all alone and I got a job with a farmer and I worked for a farmer and then as a spinner in a mill in [Nulki?], a city there. It took me two days and nights to get there by train. I was treated very well by the German people there, poor people. The high man is hard and military and looks down on all and cannot be spoken to except by title and all that and are not nice to get along with. They are harsh and hard.

“We did not like that kind of Germans at all. All the poor ones are good people. The way it happens that the Jews were chased out 6 of Germany is this; Hitler came along and said to a man, ‘Your father was born in Poland; you belong there. Get out!’ and they tried to go but they are not really citizens of Poland. They were born in Germany and we have too many Jews there now and cannot admit more, not too many, so they could not come to Poland and had to camp at the border and wait and many died and all suffered badly. It is too bad. But I say that the poor German people think Hitler is all right because they have work and food.

“I worked for two years in Germany, six months as a spinner and then go home and then we come to America, as I told you.

“The church? Oh yes, it is an important part of our life. We are Roman Catholics, all about where I lived. We have many, many feast days for the church, besides such as Christmas. Our Santa Claus is St. Nicholas but we do not make so much of it there as here.

“It is strange. There we are near the Vistula River, the biggest river, and over across it is Russia and yet we are under Austrian rule.

I used to swim across the river but Russian soldiers were there and we could not stay and had to swim right back.

“I will tell you that in the old days when my father was young the nobility were cruel. They made the poor people work on large farms of 1000 acres or more and if they did not work fast enough they would whip them with long whips until they bled. They were 7 the same as slaves or serfs then. That is why the peasants revolted and fought with sc'yes. In 1846 they killed many of the high men and divided the land among themselves.

“Our schools were public schools; the principals are mostly men but women are also teachers. The government did not use to make you go to school as it does now.

“About my work in America. At first I work in the mill at Gilbertville (Mass.). There were about 24 of us in one house. That house is still standing but has been moved. It was a company house. In one room about twice the size of this one (20x15) there were three beds and six boys slept there. We bought our own groceries and gave them to the woman who kept the house and she cooked for us. She would furnish the salt and pepper and so forth but we bought the rest and paid each $3 a month for room and the cooking; because, you see, we could only earn about $2.64 a week. I was a spinner, there, but when I wanted to get married I did not want to board but to have a tenement of my own and the company houses could not be bought there.

“So I came to Pittsfield where they told me I could get a job with the Berkshire Woolen, but when I got here they told me to go to Pontoosuc (Pontoosuc Woolen [Mig.?] Co.) as I would get a better job. Well, I could not talk English yet and I worked there 8 one day and then the boss told me I would have to go. I did not know why. He paid me, I think, $1.50 and I went to the Berkshire Woolen. The boss at Pontoosuc was Irish, his name was Pat Fleming. He is dead now. I was a Polack. You see, I did not know why I was fired at first.

Two weeks later I find out. Well, I went to the Berkshire Woolen and saw the boss and asked for a job spinning. At that time, in 1910, Mr. Gilette of [Westfield?] had died and Mr. [Savery?] and Mr. Noonan came to take it over; they sold most of the company houses, soon. Mr. Noonan was then superintendent. He is the owner now. Well, the boss said,

‘You were working at Pontoosuc?’ and I told him yes and he said ‘Why did you not stay; why did you get fired?’ and I did not know and he said, ‘We have no work now for you but maybe in two weeks on the night shift’ but I needed a job then so I went to the office and went to see Mr. Noonan. I had a Polish friend who talked English for me and told Mr. Noonan I wanted a job and he asked me the same question about Pontoosuc but I did not know, but he called the boss in and told him to put me to work at once at night. So I had a job and I stayed on that job.

“As I say, after I am marry I want a tenement of my own , so I buy this one from the Jew who had bought the company houses.

“That was after my visit to Poland, where I was married. I found things much changed. Yes, too much changed, but one thing 9 I noticed, that all the boys would tip there hats and bow and I thought it was because I am an American and they know me and then I found that they are teaching them to be polite, now. They did not use to know how to be polite in the old country but they do now. They are polite to everyone and it is good. Now they must all go to school.

“Poland is a democracy, like us. They have a President but it is the, what you call it, Minister who really rules. He is about the same as a dictator and that is because Poland is afraid of war. They are afraid of enemies on all sides. I get letters from my people and at Christmas time they were much afraid of war because of Hitler. They have now military training for those of 18 to 21 but it is not a draft; it is like our own militia, here. The Polacks are great for maching marching and for drilling and for music such as drum corps and bands, anyway.

“Well, I found out why I am fired at Pontoosuc; it is just because I am Polack and the other, they are mostly Irish and French, do not like me. It is hard to ge acquainted, you see, and then, people were cold to me because there are some Polacks who do not know how to behave. When I come here there are only eight or families here and they are new and

some of them are what you call bums. Bum weavers and bum spinners — and just bums that 10 drink too much. They are so poor that they never had money in Poland. They raised things on the farm and when they get a couple dollars here they go out to spend it and get drunk. And the Polacks are always strong and like to show how strong they are and they start throwing things and fighting, and in a boarding house a fight would start and they would break the windows and furniture and the police would have to come.

One day Judge White said in the Court that he was tired of seeing so many Polacks always in court on Monday morning and they ought to be sent back to Poland. The Polacks were to blame all right but they couldn't really help it.

“Well, that made me think and I and some others got together and we organized some societies, the Polish National Alliance and the Falcons and a Young Men's Association, but that one did not last, but the Alliance and the Falcons did. It gave the young fellows something to do in spare time. In Poland they did not have much of any spare time but here they got paid on Saturday and wanted to do something. So we gave them something to do. we have a headquarters in the German Hall that is next to [Curtin's?] Hall on Peck's Road at Wahconah Street and then we built the Falcon's Hall that is called Bel-Air Hall, now, and there they have their meetings and their drum corps and things and you do not see many Polacks in court nowadays. So many are here now that there is good, 11 don't you think? So many came to work in the textile mills and then in the G. E. (General Electric) You see, there were many mills, in 1910, five of them, but now only two or three, one small one and the G. E. is down so the Polacks have had to do other things besides, in business.

“Why, at one time at the mill, when there was a night shift on, some of the bums brought in a case of beer, into the mill and drank it.

Mr. Noonan came in at about ten-thirty and only two machines were running, one of them was mine and the rest of the spinners and weavers were sleeping. He said, ‘We will shut down this night shift, this is too much’ and he did.

“Well, it looked like I was out of a job but I went to see Mr. Noonan and asked for a day job, and he said 'sure,’ and gave me a day job.

I have worked mostly on day work since. I worked all the time except one time when things were down, then I worked for six months at the G. E., but I did not get through at the Berkshire Woolen, even then. It was just when things was slack.

“Yes, four of my children are working, only one little one goes to school and we get along. We do not want the wife to work. We do not think it is right when a woman is a mother to go out to work from the home. It is not right for her to work out, then. In Poland the women work the same as the men. Why they will not let 12 the men milk cows on the farm, for instance! They say that a man's hand is too hard and dirty to milk the cows and the women do it there altogether.

“We have the same kind of liquor in Poland as here but the men do not drink as much except in the cities; the farmers and their families do not have it. They cannot get money to spend on it but you see, when they get to America and make money, even only a little, they do not know what to do except to have what they call a good time and get drunk.

“I was in the court when the judge said there was too many Polacks being arrested. I was never arrested myself but I thought about that and that is why we started the societies. I am still in the Polish Alliance but not in the Falcons, that is for younger people. But these societies have helped a great deal. Polacks are better respected now.”